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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: April 10, 2008

Heated Debate As EU Treaty Agreed

¶1. The Austrian Parliament ratified the EU Reform Treaty on Wednesday after a heated and at times emotional debate. Along with the coalition partners OeVP and SPOe, the opposition Greens also supported the Treaty. The two other opposition parties, the FPOe and the BZÖ, vehemently opposed ratification, and continued to call for a referendum. The leaders of the FPOe and the BZÖ, Heinz-Christian Strache and Peter Westenthaler, spoke of a "constitutional violation," and in response, Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer (SPOe) criticized them for "wanting Austria to end up outside the European Union." Gusenbauer emphasized that ratification of the Treaty was an "important, necessary and right step" for both Austria and Europe. Austria is the eighth EU member state to ratify the Treaty of Lisbon, which will establish a President for the European Council, give more powers to the European Parliament, allow citizens to petition for a referendum, and decrease the size of the EU Commission.

The debate of the EU Reform Treaty in Parliament yesterday centered on the question of whether a referendum on the treaty was necessary and whether ratification would cost Austria its independence and more particularly its neutrality. FPOe boss Heinz-Christian Strache, a leading opponent of ratification, said that the SPOe, OeVP and the Greens wanted to make Austria a "small province of Brussels" and even compared the event to the "Anschluss" with Nazi Germany 70 years ago, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung reports.

Mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung, which has been highly critical of the Treaty of Lisbon throughout, runs the front-page headline "Breach of Constitution in Parliament!" Following a "verbal battle" in Parliament over the treaty, 151 MPs voted in favor of the document, and 27 against, the tabloid says. For liberal daily Der Standard, the "atmosphere in Parliament yesterday resembled scenes from a soccer stadium rather than a state occasion." While Chancellor Gusenbauer praised the EU as the "most successful project of civilization," FPOe MP Barbara Rosenkranz said it was a "project with a sell-by date." Meanwhile, the daily's chief editor Alexandra Foederl-Schmid criticizes the government of having "failed to use the opportunity to actively inform the Austrian people" about the Treaty. "As soon as the brouhaha over ratification has died down, the coalition will have to live up to its obligation to inform. Democracy also means facing the people's questions."

Greater School Autonomy Recommended

¶2. A commission on education reform in Austria has submitted its second report, recommending a simplified administrative system and greater autonomy for schools, as for example on hiring teachers. The

dual responsibilities of federal and provincial administrations need to be cut, the commission said, and suggested money saved on administration should be going towards improving the schools themselves.

In related news, ten schools in Vienna and Upper Austria have applied for permission to install video camera surveillance systems. The data protection commission has said schools must present detailed proof of why such measures are necessary, and has also pushed for a general discussion with schools on security issues.

Looking to reform the nation's schools, the School Reform Commission, created by the coalition government, released its second report on Wednesday. The report recommends turning the school system inside out and simplifying it thoroughly, allowing money currently spent on administration to be spent on the schools themselves, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung says. Presently, both the federal and provincial governments are responsible for schools, though local authorities also conduct inspections. The report proposes that the federal government be given total responsibility, ruling out the need for provincial and local school inspectors. The commission also recommends that all teachers should be covered by public services and salary legislation. Currently, teachers of different school types receive different salaries. The training of teachers should also be standardized by integrating teacher education colleges into universities and by implementing admission tests for all potential teachers. The money to be saved by these measures, several million of Euros according to the commission, could be handed to the schools. They should also be given more autonomy and control over how the money is spent, choosing their own teachers, priorities and curriculum, the commission believes.

King Abdullah Praises Austria on Mideast

¶3. Jordan's King Abdullah has completed a two-day official visit to Austria during which he held talks with top political leaders. Following talks Wednesday with Austrian President Heinz Fischer, the King praised Austria's long-standing commitment to the Middle East peace process and expressed hopes for Austria to play a "fruitful role" within the EU. The Jordanian monarch invited Fischer to pay a reciprocal visit to Jordan this coming November. Mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung says Jordan's King Abdullah "praised Austria's balanced and friendly position in the Middle East" during his official visit to Vienna this week. The Mideast peace process "naturally" topped the agenda during the Jordanian monarch's meeting with Austrian President Heinz Fischer. King Abdullah also expressed his hope that Austria's position on the Middle East might also "bear fruit within the European Union." Currently, the peace process was at a "critical stage," facing huge challenges in the coming months, the Jordanian King added, and concluded by emphasizing the "long and cordial friendship" between Jordan and Austria. Austria's President Heinz Fischer replied that regarding the Middle East, he was "hoping for perspectives, for a just and acceptable solution for both sides." At the end of this process, "there should naturally be two independent states."

Austria to Take Over Command of EUFOR Troops in Chad

¶4. Col. Heinz Assmann, the commander of the Austrian contingent of soldiers deployed in Chad as part of the EUFOR peacekeeping mission, is scheduled to take over command of the entire EUFOR special forces in the African country as of April 15. Analyzing the current situation in Chad, a commentator on ORF television said the "decisive question is whether EUFOR will be able to limit its mission to the protection of refugees. The rebels are quiet for the time being, but there can be no doubt they will launch new attacks in the future." Semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung quotes the operation general commander of the EUFOR's Chad mission, Irish gen. Patrick Nash as praising the Austrian contingent for "doing a great job." Austria's Defense Minister Norbert Darabos, who was in Chad visiting the Austrian soldiers earlier this week, was "very proud" of the General's assessment, the daily writes. It "shows we might the right decision to commit ourselves to this mission," Darabos added.

¶ 15. ... headlines an Austrian daily, writing about the report before Congress of US General David Petraeus this week. The hearing turned into another "site of the presidential election campaign, with the three presidential hopefuls, John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in their statements each giving "a taste of what to expect in months to come," the daily comments. McCain argued "success in Iraq is within reach," and a withdrawal would therefore be "irresponsible," but Hillary Clinton criticized it would be "irresponsible to continue to pursue a policy that has failed to produce the results we've been promised again and again." Barack Obama emphasized the "strategically wrong decision" to invade Iraq in the first place, and called for a timetable on troop withdrawal.

In centrist daily Die Presse, Washington correspondent Norbert Rief headlines "Iraq war: A general between the fronts." Like other Austrian commentators, Rief argues the three US presidential hopefuls have used Gen. Petraeus' report to Congress as an "opportunity for some verbal sparring on the military operation's future, to present their own strategies for Iraq's future and to badmouth their competitors' proposals." Petraeus, Rief continues, was downgraded to a mere extra, but he did make clear that in his view a premature troop pullout would undo all military success achieved with the surge in Iraq.

Senior commentator for liberal daily Der Standard Gudrun Harrer says "with freedom came chaos" in Iraq. "The fact that the US troops did nothing to stop the wave of looting after the fall of Baghdad in 2003 was the beginning of many Iraqis' alienation from their US liberators." In addition, most analysts of the past five years' developments agree the United States' "biggest mistake was to dissolve the Iraqi army," Harrer writes. The commentator suggests the US "failed to understand that the ensuing chaos contained a powerful message: Whoever ends up running Iraq after Saddam Hussein is not going to succeed in creating and maintaining stability." Furthermore, developments led to a "growing distrust of the US among Iraqis, even among those sympathetic to their country's invasion. The looting had many asking themselves whether the Iraqi people's identity was to be destroyed."

Olympic Torch Relay Changed In San Francisco

¶ 16. The Olympic torch relay has taken place in San Francisco amid tight security and general confusion, after the original route was cut in half and altered, as thousands of pro- and anti-China activists lined the streets. The Mayor of San Francisco cited security concerns as the reason to change the route. The closing ceremony was moved from a waterfront plaza to a motorway overpass in what commentators and observers described as a "cat-and-mouse game." Demonstrators sought to disrupt earlier torch relays in Athens, Istanbul, Paris and London, says ORF online news.
Kilner